PATTERNS OF POWER · THE SETTLEMENT PROTOCOL

The Line No Sword Could Forge

Solomonic Descent, the Bishop from Egypt, and Seven Centuries of Ethiopian Legitimacy, 1270–1974

HELD AS TESTED, NOT REVEALED

THE LINE NO SWORD COULD FORGE
PREFACE

Preface: the collaboration, and what this study is for

On how the work was made, the question it asks, and the discipline it is held in.

This study is part of the Patterns of Power series and, like the others, it is a collaboration. The research direction, the case selection, and the judgement are the author's; the historical synthesis, the drafting, and much of the scholarly retrieval were done with Claude, Anthropic's model, each claim checked against the record before the next was begun. The method is stated openly because it is an emerging form of knowledge production and ought to be visible rather than concealed, and because a reader is entitled to know how a thing was built before deciding what to make of it.

The series examines particular orders — a dynasty, a conquest, a republic, a commercial oligarchy — and asks a single question of each. Not how the powerful extracted, which is the older question and a well-answered one, but something prior and stranger: how did a distribution of holdings originally taken by force become an arrangement that other armed men would defend rather than contest? How does a warlord's camp become a country? This study puts that question to the Ethiopian Empire, which held one dynasty and one legitimating claim across seven centuries on a continent where almost nothing else lasted a fraction as long.

The framework is stated in full below, so no prior reading is required, and nothing in this study depends on having read another. And it is held as tested, not revealed. It is a lens laid over the record — illuminating and partial — to be corrected by whatever the case will not fit rather than defended against it. Where Ethiopia resists the framework, this study says so and goes after the resistance rather than around it; there is a section given entirely to what the framework got wrong here. To explain how an order legitimated itself is neither to praise it nor to excuse what it did.

THE LINE NO SWORD COULD FORGE
SECTION ONE

The puzzle

Seven hundred and four years, and the eighty-six-year hole in the middle of them.

The number usually given for the Ethiopian Solomonic dynasty is seven hundred and four years: from 1270, when a lord named Yekuno Amlak overthrew the ruling house and claimed the throne by right of descent from King Solomon of Israel, to 1974, when a committee of junior army officers deposed Haile Selassie and drove him from the palace in the back of a Volkswagen. Between those two dates the dynasty survived Muslim invasion that nearly annihilated it, the collapse of central authority, the Scramble for Africa, an Italian occupation, and the arrival of the twentieth century. No other dynasty on earth ran that long. The comparison cases in this series — Sasanian Persia at four centuries, the unified caliphate at rather less — are not close.

That is the first thing needing explanation, and the obvious explanations do not work. It was not military supremacy: Ethiopia was invaded successfully more than once and in the sixteenth century came within a campaign season of ceasing to exist. It was not geography, though the highlands helped: mountainous terrain divides as easily as it protects, and Ethiopia's mountains gave every regional lord a fortress. It was not administrative machinery, which was thin to the point of transparency for most of the period. Something else was doing the work.

But there is a second thing, and it is the more interesting one, because the seven hundred and four years is in an important sense a lie. From roughly 1769 to 1855 — eighty-six years, an eighth of the whole span — Ethiopia had no functioning central authority at all. Regional warlords fought each other continuously across the highlands. Twenty-three men occupied the imperial throne in that period, several of them repeatedly; one, Tekle Giyorgis, was enthroned and deposed six times between 1789 and 1800 and was nicknamed *Fitsame Mengist*, the end of the kingdom. The emperors of this era were figureheads confined to the capital, and the men who

actually ruled were provincial lords who had made their power hereditary and who fought over the office that had the power to appoint and dismiss kings.

That period is called the *Zemene Mesafint*, the Era of the Princes, and it is straightforwardly the thing this series calls warlordism: armed men holding by force alone, nothing safely owned, every death an invitation to the grab. So the Ethiopian record is not seven centuries of a working settlement. It is roughly six centuries of a working settlement with a long, violent hole punched through the late eighteenth and early nineteenth.

The puzzle is therefore double, and the second half is the useful half. Not only *why did it last so long*, but *why, when it broke, did it break in that particular way* — and why, having broken so thoroughly, did it reassemble around exactly the same claim rather than around something new? The warlords of the Zemene Mesafint could have abolished the throne. They had the swords and eighty-six years to do it. Instead every one of them kept a Solomonic emperor in Gondar and ruled in his name. That is a strange thing for a victorious warlord to do, and explaining it is most of what this study is for.

THE LINE NO SWORD COULD FORGE
SECTION TWO

The framework, for a reader who has not met it

Possession, ownership, the bystanders' problem, and the four properties of a working anchor.

Begin with a distinction that modern intuition tends to collapse. **Possession** is a present-tense physical relation: what I can hold right now, by my own strength. The field I am standing on, the grain in my barn that I can defend today. Force is entirely adequate to possession, because force is exactly the capacity to take and hold in the present.

Ownership is something else. To own a field is to claim it will be mine tomorrow while I sleep, mine while I am away at war, mine when I am not standing on it and could not at that instant defend it — and that when I die, you will treat my heir as its owner. Ownership is a structure of expectations about how other people will behave toward a thing across time, including across my absence and my death. And force, sovereign over the present, is impotent over precisely this. A sword takes a field today; it cannot promise the field next spring, still less that a son will hold it after. The part of a holding that force cannot reach is exactly the part that distinguishes ownership from possession, and it has to be manufactured by something other than force.

Now the political problem. A world of armed men who hold only by force is exhausting and unprofitable, and the standard account says they eventually settle because settling pays better than fighting. That is true and it is not enough. It explains the incentive to settle; it does not explain why any particular settlement holds on the day defection would pay.

Take one armed man deciding whether to seize his neighbour's holding, and strip out conscience entirely. His decision is a forecast about third parties — the other

lords who will watch. If they wait, the fight is one against one, and he likes his chances. If some join him for a share, better. If all of them fall on him, he is destroyed. Now take the bystanders' problem, which is the harder one and where everything turns. Each of them asks: *is this my quarrel?* Absent some common ground of title, the honest answer is no. My neighbour's holding is his affair, and spending my men on his defence buys me casualties and an enemy. Worse, if I intervene and the others do not, I have made myself the next target while they husband their strength. So every bystander waits — and knows the others will wait — and that shared expectation is exactly what makes the grab safe.

Warlordism, on this reading, is not a moral failure but a coordination failure among the men who might have punished it. Predation is safe because punishment is unreliable, and punishment is unreliable because no bystander can count on the others. The political scientist Barry Weingast formalised this structure in 1997 for the vertical case, between a ruler and his subjects: a sovereign needs only one group's acquiescence in order to transgress, so divided subjects are transgressed at will and united subjects are not, and the function of a constitution is to define what counts as a transgression — to give everyone a shared signal about when to act. The same logic runs horizontally, among armed peers.

What breaks the deadlock is a **shared source of title**. If every lord's holding derives its rightfulness from the same authority, then an attack on any holding is an attack on the ground beneath all of them. The bystander's arithmetic changes: letting this stand establishes that holdings may be taken, which is a fact about *his* holding too, so intervening becomes self-defence at one remove. And he can predict that the others are computing the same thing, which means acting does not expose him — he is joining a coalition that forms whether or not he leads it. Note where the work is done. It is done on the bystanders' expectations, and it reaches the aggressor only as a forecast he cannot beat. He abstains not because he believes, but because he can count.

Call that shared source the **anchor**. Across the cases in this series it must have four properties, and all four are structural rather than spiritual.

It must be **determinate**, yielding exactly one answer to "who rightfully holds this" and one to "who is next." A ground that yields two answers is not a ground; it is a pretext for war with citations attached.

It must be **unrevisable by any competitor**. This is the deep requirement and it is usually misunderstood. The naive threat to a settlement is that a strong man breaks the rule — but that is the manageable case, because breaking is legible and the coalition is trained to punish it. The real threat is that a strong man *changes* the rule, because rule-change does not trigger the coalition at all. If the source of title sits inside the competition, the strongest man never needs to violate anything; he revises, every subsequent seizure is regular, and the bystanders stand and watch. So the anchor must sit beyond the reach of the men competing for it.

It must be **common knowledge** — not merely known to everyone, but known by everyone to be known by everyone, and so on upward. The political scientist Michael Chwe made the point that public ceremonies are powerful not because they transmit a message to each person present but because they let each person see that everyone else is receiving it too. A coronation before assembled magnates is a machine for manufacturing that mutual awareness, and its content matters far less than the fact that everyone watched everyone else watch.

And it must be **attached to the office rather than the man**, or the ground dies with its holder and has to be rebuilt at a funeral, among armed heirs, in the worst possible conditions.

Divinity supplies all four elegantly, which is why gods are the commonest carriers. But nothing on the list requires one. Imperial China reached all four with an impersonal Heaven and the closed canon of a dead sage. Venice reached them with elaborately randomised electoral procedure. **Ethiopia reached them with a bloodline** — which is the reason this case is worth the trouble, because a bloodline sits squarely inside the human world and is still unrevisable, for the simple reason that descent is the one thing conquest cannot confer.

Two further pieces, briefly. A legitimating story does two jobs at once and they run on different fuel. Toward the mass of the ruled it buys cheap compliance, and that job requires genuine conviction, because a peasant who privately thinks the arrangement is robbery pays only when a soldier is near, which is the expensive arrangement the whole apparatus exists to avoid. Toward the armed elite it does the binding described above, and that job requires only common expectation — a lord who privately regards the coronation as theatre still cannot profit from attacking his neighbour, provided he expects the others to treat the attack as an assault on their own titles. The two audiences were never running the same program.

And there is a diagnostic that cuts through most ambiguity: **force never pays for what it does not need**. Where the strongest man in an order pays a real, avoidable cost to obtain legitimacy — where he could have simply taken, and instead petitions, submits, marries, or waits — he has revealed that the legitimacy was load-bearing for some audience whose expectations mattered. The expenditure is the proof.

THE LINE NO SWORD COULD FORGE
SECTION THREE

The historical spine

What happened, for a reader who knows nothing about Ethiopia.

Christianity arrived in the kingdom of Aksum, in what is now northern Ethiopia and Eritrea, in the fourth century. Around 350 the Patriarch of Alexandria — head of the Egyptian Christian church — consecrated a man named Frumentius as the first bishop of Ethiopia. That act, apparently a minor piece of ecclesiastical administration, established an arrangement that would run for sixteen hundred years and which this study argues was the single most structurally important fact about Ethiopian legitimacy. Hold it in reserve; we return to it.

Aksum declined. By the twelfth century the ruling house was the Zagwe dynasty, remembered now chiefly for the rock-hewn churches at Lalibela, carved downward into the living stone. The Zagwe ruled roughly a century and a half and were, throughout, dogged by a specific charge: that they were not of the right line. Many Christians regarded them as usurpers because they lacked pure Solomonic stock. This matters enormously and is easy to read past. **The criterion that would legitimate the next dynasty was already in circulation, and already being used to delegitimate the current one, before the next dynasty existed.**

In 1270 a lord named Yekuno Amlak overthrew the last Zagwe king and took the throne, claiming descent from the last king of Aksum and, behind him, from Solomon. This is conventionally called the Solomonic Restoration. Within a few decades the claim received its canonical literary form in the *Kebra Nagast*, the Glory of Kings, compiled in the early fourteenth century: the Queen of Sheba travels to Jerusalem, is seduced by Solomon, and bears a son, Menelik I, who returns to Ethiopia carrying the Ark of the Covenant, removed from the Temple. Ethiopia is thereby the new Israel, its kings the legitimate heirs of the House of David, and the Ark itself resides at Aksum, where it is said to remain, seen by no one but a single appointed guardian.

The medieval empire that followed had no fixed capital. The emperor moved constantly, a mobile court and army circulating through the provinces, consuming the surplus where it stood and reassigning offices and land as it went. In the sixteenth century the state nearly died: from 1529 Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Ghazi, called Gragn, launched an invasion from the Muslim sultanate of Adal that overran most of the highlands and burned churches and manuscripts wholesale. Ethiopia survived through a Portuguese musketeer expedition and Gragn's death in battle in 1543, and emerged demographically and institutionally battered, into a period of large-scale Oromo migration northward that reshaped the country's population permanently.

In 1636 the emperor Fasilides founded a permanent capital at Gondar. This looked like consolidation, and is usually narrated as a golden age — castles, painting, manuscript production. This study will argue it was the beginning of the end of the settlement, and will try to show why.

By 1769 central authority had collapsed. The *Zemene Mesafint* ran to 1855: eighty-six years, twenty-three emperors, real power in the hands of regional lords styled *Ras* and *Dejazmach*, and the greatest prize not the throne but the office of *Ras Bitwaded*, effectively prime minister, which carried the power to make and unmake emperors. It ended when a provincial fighter named Kassa Hailu — who had begun as something close to a bandit — defeated the major regional lords in a sequence of battles between 1852 and 1855 and had himself crowned Emperor Tewodros II.

Tewodros began the reconstruction of central authority; his successors continued it. Menelik II, crowned in 1889, did two things that define modern Ethiopia. He defeated an invading Italian army at Adwa in 1896, the only decisive victory of an African state over a European power in the Scramble for Africa, which preserved Ethiopian independence. And he conquered vast territories to the south and west, roughly doubling the size of the empire and bringing under Amhara rule large Oromo, Somali, Sidama, and other populations who had not been part of the Christian highland order.

Haile Selassie, regent from 1916 and emperor from 1930, granted Ethiopia's first written constitution in 1931 and a revised one in 1955. Italy invaded in 1935 and occupied the country until 1941; the emperor returned with British assistance. He negotiated the Ethiopian church's separation from Alexandria across the 1940s and 1950s, culminating in full autocephaly in 1959. In 1973 a famine in Wollo province killed something on the order of two hundred thousand people while the imperial

court did not acknowledge it; foreign film of the starving, intercut with footage of palace luxury, was broadcast in Addis Ababa the following year. In 1974 a creeping military mutiny consolidated into the Derg, which deposed the emperor in September, abolished the monarchy, and later that year began nationalising land. Haile Selassie died in custody in August 1975.

THE LINE NO SWORD COULD FORGE
SECTION FOUR

The line no sword could forge

The anchor named, and the four properties tested against it.

Name the anchor precisely, because vagueness here destroys the analysis. It was not "religion" and not "Christianity." It was **descent from Solomon of Israel through Menelik I**, held by one lineage, and asserted continuously for seven centuries.

The first diagnostic question is whether the founder *claimed* a standard already in circulation or *minted* one for himself, and this distinction is usually decisive. Where a ruler manufactures his own sanctity, it fails — the Roman emperor Diocletian, in the third century, took the divine name Jovius and demanded prostration, and the arrangement collapsed within months of his abdication, because the source of the new sanctity was transparently located inside the political arena and everyone could see it. Where a ruler submits to a standard he did not make, it holds. Yekuno Amlak is firmly in the second category. He did not invent Solomonic descent as a criterion of rightful rule; he asserted that he satisfied a criterion which had been in use for over a century to argue that the Zagwe did not. Whatever one thinks of the genealogy — and no historian thinks it factual — he was claiming a standard, not writing one.

Now the four properties.

Determinate? Partly, and the partial failure is the most informative single finding in the case. The anchor was perfectly determinate about which *lineage* held the right to rule and completely silent about which *member* of it. There was no rule of primogeniture, no fixed order of succession, no mechanism specifying which of a dead emperor's sons, brothers, cousins, or more distant kin should follow. The order paid for this gap in a specific and brutal currency, discussed below.

Unrevisable by any competitor? Completely — and this is the property that carried the whole structure. Consider what a powerful Ethiopian noble could and could not do. He could raise an army. He could win battles, take provinces, seize the

capital, control the emperor's person, and dictate imperial policy; during the Zemene Mesafint, lords did all of these. What he could not do, by any exertion of force whatever, was become a descendant of Solomon. Genealogy is the one asset conquest cannot transfer. A victorious general can take a treasury, a fortress, a crown, and a wife; he cannot take an ancestor.

The parallel case is instructive and comes from the far side of Asia. The conqueror Timur — Tamerlane — in the fourteenth century took everything from Delhi to Ankara, commanded his cavalry absolutely, and could not become a descendant of Genghis Khan, which was the sole recognised criterion of legitimate supreme authority among the Turco-Mongol soldiers he led. So he married a Genghisid princess, took the subordinate title *güregen*, royal son-in-law, and ruled through puppet khans he installed and could have dispensed with in an afternoon. Two unconnected civilisations, two bloodline anchors, and in both cases the most powerful man alive paying a real price rather than forging what could not be forged.

This forces a correction to the framework as it had been stated. The earlier formulation held that an anchor must be *exogenous* — outside the human contest altogether, in heaven or an eternal law. Ethiopia and the Chinggisid steppe both show that this is too strong. A bloodline is entirely inside the human world; it consists of living men. It is nonetheless unrevisable, because no competitor can forge descent. **Unrevisability is the requirement; exogeneity is only the most common means of achieving it.** The weaker claim covers more cases and is harder to accuse of mysticism, and this study recommends adopting it.

Common knowledge? Manufactured relentlessly and by every available channel. The *Kebra Nagast* supplied the narrative. The imperial titulature supplied the recitation: *Negusa Nagast*, King of Kings; *Seyoume Igziabeher*, Elect of God; *Moa Anbessa Ze Imnegede Yehuda*, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, which preceded the imperial name in formal usage. The coronation supplied the ceremony, performed by the church before the assembled nobility — precisely Chwe's machine, an event whose function is less to inform the magnates than to let each magnate watch the others being informed. The Ark at Aksum supplied a physical object, and every Ethiopian church a replica of it, the *tabot*, without which a church is not consecrated. And the claim was still being made in legal instruments within living memory: the revised constitution of 1955 declared that the imperial dignity remained perpetually attached to the line descending from Menelik I, son of

Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. A twentieth-century constitution, drafted with American advice, asserting a genealogy from the tenth century before Christ.

Attached to office rather than man? Yes, and the Zemene Mesafint proves it in the strongest way available, which is by showing the office continuing to function while its holders were interchangeable and powerless.

THE LINE NO SWORD COULD FORGE
SECTION FIVE

A bishop sent from Egypt

The interpreter class, the expenditure that reveals what it was worth, and the year the crown finally captured it.

Every anchor requires a class of specialists to maintain it, define its orthodoxy, and perform its rituals — an interpreter class. Such a class is always the ruler's indispensable partner and always his most dangerous potential rival, because it controls the supply of the thing that makes his rule cheap. The diagnostic questions are how the interpreters were recruited, whether the ruler could appoint or remove them, what independent economic base they held, and — a question that turns out to matter far more than it sounds — where they were physically located.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church held the interpretive seam, and it held it with an unusually strong hand. It possessed an independent economic base: land called *samon*, granted in perpetuity rather than as revocable benefice, and by the twentieth century the church held something above a fifth of the cultivated land of the empire. It possessed a monopoly on literacy and education, conducted in Ge'ez, a liturgical language no longer spoken by anyone, which put a hard barrier between the clergy who could read the sacred texts and a population that could not. And it performed the coronation: the emperor was anointed and crowned by the church, which is to say that the man whose legitimacy rested on divine election required clergymen to confirm the election.

But the structurally decisive fact is the one introduced above and held in reserve. **For roughly sixteen hundred years, the head of the Ethiopian church was not Ethiopian.**

From Frumentius in the fourth century until 1951, the *Abuna* — the primate of the Ethiopian church — was appointed by the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria and sent from Egypt. He was, as a rule, an Egyptian monk, frequently unable to speak Ge'ez or Amharic, arriving in a country he had never seen to preside over a church

whose language he did not know. The procedure by which he was obtained is worth stating exactly, because it is the study's central finding. On the death of an Abuna, the Ethiopian emperor sent an embassy to Egypt bearing presents for the Coptic patriarch, requesting a successor. And because Egypt was under Muslim rule from the seventh century onward, the emperor also had to pay a substantial fee to the Muslim government of Egypt, without whose permission the new Abuna could not travel.

Consider what that means in the terms of this framework. The most powerful Christian monarch in the Horn of Africa, holding uncontested force within his own realm, could not appoint the man who would crown him. He had to petition a foreign bishop in another country, and bribe a Muslim ruler for the exit permit. He could not select the candidate, could not depose him once installed, and could not replace him except by repeating the whole procedure and waiting.

Force never pays for what it does not need. This is the expenditure diagnostic operating at maximum clarity, and there is no cleaner instance anywhere in the archive of this series. An emperor who was, at home, the Elect of God, sent tribute abroad — to a Muslim government, for a Christian bishop, chosen by someone else — because the legitimacy that bishop carried was load-bearing and could not be manufactured domestically at any price.

And the arrangement had real teeth, as one episode shows with almost comic force. In the eleventh century the vizier of the Fatimid caliph in Cairo overrode the Coptic patriarch's intended candidate and compelled the ordination of a different man, Sawiros, who on arrival in Ethiopia began building mosques — ostensibly for Muslim traders — and provoked such an uproar that he was imprisoned and the mosques destroyed. An Ethiopian emperor could imprison an Abuna. He could not choose one. The interpreter class was so far outside his control that a Muslim official in Cairo had more say in its composition than he did.

Set this against the comparison cases and its strangeness stands out. In the Sasanian empire, the priest Kartir accumulated enormous power and was then pushed back down by the king Narseh, who reasserted royal control over religious affairs. In the Roman empire, Ambrose of Milan humbled the emperor Theodosius — but Ambrose was a Roman subject in a Roman city, and later emperors appointed bishops and summoned councils routinely. In Sunni Islam the scholarly class successfully resisted caliphal capture, but the scholars were themselves

inhabitants of the caliph's territory. Ethiopia's arrangement was different in kind: the apex of its interpreter class lived beyond the frontier, under a rival religion's government, appointed by a man the emperor could only petition. This is the most literally exogenous interpreter class in the collection.

Which makes the ending worth noting carefully, and worth not overclaiming. Across the 1940s and 1950s Haile Selassie negotiated the church's independence from Alexandria. An agreement in 1948 permitted an Ethiopian archbishop; Abuna Basilios was consecrated in 1951; and in 1959 the Coptic Pope Cyril VI elevated him to Patriarch, granting the Ethiopian church full autocephaly. For the first time since the fourth century, the head of the Ethiopian church was an Ethiopian, resident in Addis Ababa, within reach of the crown.

Fifteen years later the dynasty was gone, and the Marxist government that replaced it disestablished the church and nationalised its land.

This study does not claim a causal link, and a reader should be actively suspicious of one. The 1974 revolution has abundant sufficient causes — famine, a mutinous army, a radicalised student movement, an aged emperor, land hunger in the south — and none of them requires the autocephaly to explain. But the framework does predict that a ruler who captures his own interpreter class buys control at the price of the exogeneity that was doing the load-bearing work, and it is a fact worth recording that the one Ethiopian emperor who finally acquired a domestic church was also the last.

THE LINE NO SWORD COULD FORGE
SECTION SIX

Who could make an owner

Gult, rist, and the mechanism that kept title flowing from a single source — until it stopped.

The central diagnostic in this framework asks who could grant holdings to armed men that outlasted the grant. The claim being tested is a strong one: that a settlement holds only where the anchor is the *sole author* of the armed elite's titles, because the moment a second author appears — a patron who can make men owners — those men's loyalty travels with their patron rather than with the ground, and the patron who moves against the settlement does not face the bystander coalition but brings a piece of it with him.

Ethiopia ran two land systems, and the distinction between them is unusually clean.

Rist was hereditary land-use right in the northern highlands, held not by individuals but by descent groups. A person's rist was his claim to a share of land first held by any ancestor in any line of descent; it could not be sold outside the family, mortgaged, or given away, because it belonged to the lineage rather than the holder. The anthropologist Donald Hoben, whose study of Amhara land tenure remains the standard treatment, glossed rist as land-*use* right, and its defining feature is that it was permanent and inalienable and came from ancestry rather than from any grant.

Gult was something categorically different. It was a grant from the crown conferring the right to collect tribute from the peasants working a defined territory, together with judicial and administrative authority over them and the power to mobilise them militarily. Hoben glossed it as fief-*holding* right. Critically, gult was compensation for office. Until salaries were introduced in the twentieth century, gult was the standard way an official or a military commander was paid, and it was tied to the office rather than the man. In principle it was not transferable by inheritance or

sale, because it was not a property right at all but the revenue attached to a public function.

So: the armed and administrative elite of the Ethiopian empire held gult. The peasant lineages of the north held rist. Hereditary, independent, unrevisable tenure existed in Ethiopia — and it was held by the people with no armies, while the people with armies held tenure that was conditional, office-linked, and revocable by the crown.

That is sole authorship of title, and it is the answer to why the Ethiopian nobility, which was numerous and heavily armed and had every mountain it needed, did not simply fragment the country in the fourteenth century. No lord could make another man an owner. Only the emperor could, and the emperor held by a claim no lord could forge. Every armed man's title traced to the same source, which meant that an attack on any lord's holding was an attack on the ground beneath every lord's holding, which is precisely the structure that converts bystanders into an automatic coalition.

Now chase the complication, because it is where the case gets genuinely interesting.

The clean picture just given is too clean, and the sources say so in three places.

First, gult was not always granted by the emperor. Provincial rulers were in some periods empowered to make land grants themselves — which is delegated authorship, and delegated authorship is a second author with extra steps.

Second, there existed a recognised category called *riste-gult*: gult that had been made heritable, passing to descendants along with the office obligation, and thereby acquiring the permanence that properly belonged to rist. It was rare enough to be marked as an exception, and it survived long enough that the Ethiopian parliament had to pass a bill specifically abolishing riste-gult and the related *siso* tenure in the 1960s. If it needed abolishing in the twentieth century, it was not a marginal phenomenon.

Third, and most damagingly, the historian Donald Crummey — working on land charters from the Gondarine period — argued that gult rights there were transferred by sale and inheritance without necessarily involving the state at all. This is a contested claim and should be flagged as one: the mainstream position treats Crummey's Gondarine evidence as exceptional rather than typical, and this study does not have the expertise to adjudicate. But if Crummey is broadly right rather

than locally right, the sole-authorship reading of Ethiopia weakens considerably, and the reader should know that.

Here is why the complication is worth more than the clean picture. **Crummey's exception is located in the Gondarine period** — which is to say, after 1636, when Fasilides founded the permanent capital.

Before Gondar, Ethiopian emperors did not have capitals. They had mobile courts: the emperor moved continuously through his provinces with his army and his household, consuming the local surplus on the spot, holding court, hearing cases, and — this is the mechanism — reassigning gult as he went. The itinerant court was not a picturesque survival of nomadism. It was the machine that maintained sole authorship of title. A lord whose right to collect tribute depended on a grant that would be reviewed the next time the emperor's camp came over the ridge could not treat that grant as his own property, and neither could his neighbours, and all of them knew it about each other.

Fixing the capital at Gondar switched the machine off. Emperors stayed in Gondar for extended periods and the provinces went unvisited. Regional lords, no longer subject to periodic physical re-authorisation, consolidated their positions and made them hereditary — and hereditary regional lordship is exactly a second author of title. Within roughly a century and a third, central authority had collapsed entirely and the Zemene Mesafint had begun.

This is the framework's second failure route, with a datable onset and an identifiable mechanism: a second author of title appears, and the settlement reverts to a contest between authors wearing the costume of an order. And it has the property the framework says to expect — that the change looks, at the time, like something benign. Founding a permanent capital reads as consolidation, maturation, the arrival of a proper state with castles and a court and a manuscript tradition. Gondar is narrated in most histories as a golden age. Structurally it was the removal of the only device that kept every armed man's title flowing from one source.

THE LINE NO SWORD COULD FORGE
SECTION SEVEN

The mountain of princes, and the eighty-six-year hole

What an underdetermined succession rule costs, and what the collapse actually proves.

Return to the determinacy failure identified earlier. The Solomonic anchor answered "which line rules" and said nothing whatever about "which man is next." There was no primogeniture. There was no fixed rule at all.

The framework's expectation here is specific: where a succession rule is underdetermined, the order will develop a *patch*, and the brutality of the patch is a rough measure of the size of the gap. Ethiopia's patch was among the most remarkable in the historical record. Male relatives of the emperor were confined for life on a flat-topped mountain — first Amba Geshen, and after its destruction in the sixteenth-century wars, Wehni — where they lived in reasonable comfort, and from which they did not come down. The mountain was not a prison for criminals. It was a warehouse for legitimate claimants, and its function was to ensure that when an emperor died there was no rival Solomonid at large with an army.

This belongs to a recognisable family of solutions. The Ottoman sultans practised fratricide, and later confined princes to the *kafes*, the cage, within the palace. The logic is identical in each case and it is not sadism: an anchor determinate about lineage but silent about member generates, at every succession, a set of men each of whom has a genuine claim, and a genuine claim in the hands of a man with soldiers is a civil war. Ethiopia's answer was a mountain. The mountain is the price of the gap, and it was paid by particular people, for their whole lives, for seven hundred years.

Now the stress test, which is the most valuable material in any case study and which the framework says to hunt for specifically.

The Zemene Mesafint was a real and total collapse of central authority. Regional lords fought continuously. The imperial office was occupied by twenty-three men in

eighty-six years, most of them installed and removed by whichever lord currently held the office of *Ras Bitwaded*, and the wars were fought not over the throne but over that office — over the position that had the power to appoint and dismiss emperors.

Read that sentence again, because it contains the finding.

The most powerful warlords in Ethiopia, over four generations, fought each other for the right to *control* the emperor. Not one of them abolished the throne. Not one of them declared himself emperor on the strength of his victories. Not one of them, so far as the record shows, forged a Solomonic genealogy for himself — and the men in question were killing each other by the thousand for the right to install a puppet, which is a considerable amount of trouble to go to for a formality.

The framework explains this exactly. The anchor was unforgeable. A lord who took Gondar acquired possession of the emperor and could rule in his name; a lord who abolished the emperor acquired nothing, because he could not put himself in the vacated position and neither could anyone else. The anchor was not a prize that could be won. It could only be occupied by someone who satisfied a criterion none of the competitors satisfied, which meant the rational move for every competitor was to seize the man who did satisfy it and speak through him. And so the anchor floated free of every faction, controlled by whoever was currently winning and owned by none of them — which is precisely what happened to the Abbasid caliph under the Buyid and Seljuk warlords who took Baghdad from the tenth century onward, kept the caliph, sought investiture from him, and ruled in his name.

The consequence is the answer to the second half of this study's puzzle. Because the anchor survived the collapse of the power that held it, it was available for reuse the moment someone could take and hold the country. When Kassa Hailu had beaten the regional lords by 1855, he did not need to invent a legitimacy. He had himself crowned Tewodros II, and the seven-century-old claim resumed operation as though the interval had been a suspension rather than a break.

An anchor a ruler controls dies with the ruler. An anchor no competitor can forge outlives every competitor — including the ones who reduce it to a figurehead for four generations.

THE LINE NO SWORD COULD FORGE
SECTION EIGHT

The ones the anchor did not author

Who was inside the floor and outside the settlement, and where the violence went.

A settlement is only as wide as the set of people whose titles it authors. Everyone else inside the territory is held by force alone, and the methods of force are what they experience. This diagnostic is the one most reliably absent from analyses written to an extraction framework, and in Ethiopia it is where the record is worst.

The Solomonic anchor was Christian, Ge'ez-liturgical, and — increasingly over time — Amhara. It authored the titles of the Christian highland nobility of Amhara and Tigray. It did not author anything for anyone else, and there were a great many other people.

Muslim populations, substantial and long-established across the lowlands and the east, stood entirely outside a legitimating scheme that defined the realm as the new Israel. The Beta Israel, Ethiopia's Jewish population, lost land rights and were pushed into landless craft occupations, which in a society where rist was the basis of belonging amounted to a permanent exclusion from the order itself. The Oromo, whose great migrations reshaped the country from the sixteenth century, were incorporated in some regions and dominated in others, and the imperial elite remained overwhelmingly Amhara — by the twentieth century something above four-fifths of the general officer corps.

The sharpest instance is Menelik's southern expansion in the late nineteenth century. The conquered south was not brought into the settlement; it was brought under the gult system as an object. Northern soldier-settlers, the *neftegna* — the gun-bearers — were granted rights over southern land and the people on it, who became *gabbar*, tribute-paying cultivators on land they had held before the conquest. The

result was that the framework's machinery, which in the north bound an armed elite into a shared order, in the south simply transferred title over an entire population to men who had arrived with rifles. By the 1970s the distribution of land had reached a condition that a revolution could hardly fail to exploit: the church, the imperial family, and the nobility between them holding the overwhelming majority of it, and the peasantry a fraction.

This is worth stating plainly because the framework can otherwise flatter what it describes. The anchor was elegant. It bound a proud and heavily armed nobility into six centuries of relative peace with one another. It did that by defining a settlement that a large proportion of the empire's inhabitants were not inside, and the peace among the armed was purchased in part with the subjection of everyone the anchor did not name.

On the second audience, the evidence is thinner but points one way. The mass job — the cheap compliance of the ruled — was performed by the church, and performed thoroughly: a liturgical language the congregation could not understand, a monopoly on education and literacy, adult literacy still under ten per cent at the end of the imperial period, and an account of the social order in which the emperor's authority and the peasant's station were parts of one divinely arranged whole. The elite job appears to have run on something weaker and quite sufficient. The scholar Sara Marzagora has noted that learned Ethiopians did not generally understand Solomonic descent as a claim about paternity; the kings of Abyssinia were understood as heirs to Solomon's kingdom rather than as sons of his body. The educated elite, in other words, knew broadly what the genealogy was. It bound them for seven centuries anyway — which is what the framework predicts, since the elite half of the machine requires only that each magnate expect the others to act on the claim, not that any of them believe it.

THE LINE NO SWORD COULD FORGE
SECTION NINE

What the case shows, and where it breaks

Including the parts the framework got wrong, which are the parts worth having.

What it shows. Ethiopia is a fifth civilisation, on a fifth continent, independent of the four already examined in this series, arriving at the same structure: an order legitimated by a source of title no competitor could revise, maintained by an interpreter class, underwriting a system of holdings, and governing — imperfectly — the passage of authority across deaths. It confirms the general pattern by a route none of the others took.

It contributes three things the other cases could not. It establishes, alongside the Chinggisid steppe, that the anchor need not be transcendent at all, only unforgeable by the current claimants — which forces the framework's central requirement to be restated in a weaker and better form. It supplies the archive's most literally exogenous interpreter class, in a bishop appointed abroad by a foreign church under a rival religion's government, together with the expenditure that proves what he was worth. And it supplies an unusually clean instance of the sole-authorship condition, complete with a datable mechanism for its erosion and the predicted consequence arriving on schedule.

Where it breaks. Four things, stated as findings rather than hedges.

First, the sole-authorship reading rests on a contested empirical claim. If Crummey's Gondarine land charters describe the norm rather than an exception — if gult was widely alienable and heritable in practice while being non-heritable in principle — then the neat contrast between gult and rist is substantially an artefact of normative sources, and the strongest single piece of evidence in this study weakens. The framework wants gult to have been revocable. The reader should know that specialists disagree about how revocable it actually was.

Second, the 1974 collapse is failure route four — the floor broken from outside — and the temptation to call it a new mode should be resisted. When this study was first drafted it proposed a *fifth* failure route: an exogenous anchor displaced by a rival exogenous anchor, Marxism arriving to out-argue the Solomonic claim. That was wrong, and the companion paper *The Field of Anchors* retracts it. Marxism did not defeat the Solomonic anchor in a contest of belief; it arrived carried by a coalition — a radicalised student movement and a mutinous, foreign-trained army — with a floor of its own, and that coalition out-*floored* the imperial order the way one hierarchy conquers another. Marxism-Leninism was itself a complete, working anchor for the settlement the Derg intended to impose: determinate (the vanguard party as bearer of correct consciousness), unrevisable by competitors (grounded in laws of history no rival can edit), made common knowledge by relentless ritual, and attached to the office of the Party rather than any man. The same is true of the Italian nationalism, wrapped in the myth of Rome reborn, that had invaded in 1935. Neither was a solvent that dissolved Ethiopia's anchor; each was a rival hierarchy's anchor, arriving on the point of a rival hierarchy's floor. So 1974 belongs with 1935 in route four: Ethiopia was not delegitimated from within but conquered from without, and by the framework's own discipline (diagnostic D9a) a conquest is *not a test of the anchor* and must be excluded from the evidence about it. The deeper point the confusion exposed — that every anchor pacifies an inside only by constituting an outside, so the war it ends within a hierarchy merely relocates to the hierarchy's edge — is the subject of *The Field of Anchors* and is where this case's real contribution to the framework lies.

Third, the framework has no account of why the Zemene Mesafint lasted eighty-six years. If the anchor was intact and available throughout, and a claimant needed only to take and hold the country to activate it, the framework offers no reason why nobody managed it for four generations. The honest answer is that the framework describes the legitimacy problem and says nothing about the military and logistical problem of actually reunifying a mountainous country of that size, and it should not pretend otherwise.

Fourth, and most simply: the framework has nothing to say about the most famous fact concerning Ethiopia. Adwa was won in 1896 with rifles, numbers, terrain, and Italian overconfidence. Ethiopian independence in the colonial period is not a

legitimacy story, and the temptation to make it one should be refused. Not every important thing about a civilisation is about its anchor.

THE LINE NO SWORD COULD FORGE
SECTION TEN

The disciplines: what this analysis must not flatten

Four cautions.

The sources are partisan in a specific direction. Ethiopian historiography was for a long time dominated by what is sometimes called the Great Tradition — a northern, Christian, Amhara-centred narrative built on royal chronicles that were themselves court productions written to justify their subjects. The *Kebra Nagast* is not evidence about the thirteenth century; it is an artefact of the legitimation this study is analysing, and using it as a source about what happened is a category error. Recent scholarship has worked hard to recover Oromo, Muslim, and southern perspectives, and any account resting mainly on the chronicles will reproduce the chronicles' assumptions about whose country it was.

The interpreter-class finding needs a qualification the argument would rather not make. The Abuna was foreign, singular, and structurally uncapturable — but he was also, for much of the period, one man with limited administrative reach in a country with thousands of churches and a vast monastic network. A great deal of practical religious authority lay with the *Echege*, the head of the monastic order of Debre Libanos, who was Ethiopian, resident, and considerably more capturable by the crown. To describe Ethiopia's interpreter class as located outside the realm is true of its canonical apex and misleading about its working body, and the framework's tidy picture should not be allowed to obscure that.

The convergence with other cases is structural, not substantive. That Ethiopia, Persia, Rome, Islam, and China all built orders resting on an unforgeable source of title says something about the problem they were all solving. It says almost nothing about the societies themselves, which differed in everything that a person

living in them would have noticed. Structural parallel is a claim about load-bearing members, not about architecture, and certainly not about experience.

And legibility is not pardon. This study has explained why the Ethiopian state confined its own princes to a mountain for their entire lives, why it stripped the Beta Israel of the land rights that constituted belonging, why it converted the conquered south into a tributary population held by armed settlers, and why the church and the nobility ended by holding almost everything while the people who farmed it held almost nothing. Each of these has a structural logic, and this study has tried to make each logic legible. Making a thing legible is not softening it. The princes on the mountain were real men who died up there, and understanding the succession problem that put them there does not shorten a single one of their sentences.

THE LINE NO SWORD COULD FORGE
CONCLUSION

Conclusion: an empty throne is not a vacant one

Returning to the puzzle.

The question was double: why did the Ethiopian settlement last so long, and why, when it broke, did it break in that particular way and then reassemble around exactly the same claim?

Both halves have the same answer, which is the single property the anchor possessed. Descent from Solomon could not be forged. It could not be won in battle, purchased, conferred by a council, or claimed by a man who had every other kind of power — and because it could not be acquired by any competitor, it could not be captured by one either. That is what made it able to bind the armed nobility for six centuries: every lord's title flowed from a source no other lord could ever come to control, so that an attack on any title was an attack on all of them, and every bystander could count on the rest.

And it is the same property that explains the shape of the collapse. When the mechanism that kept titles flowing from a single source was switched off — when the court stopped moving and the provinces stopped being re-authorised and regional lordship silently became hereditary — the settlement failed exactly as the framework says a settlement fails when a second author appears. But the anchor itself did not fail, because there was nothing about it that a warlord could break. So Ethiopia got the strangest possible collapse: total warlordism, conducted by men who fought for eighty-six years over the right to stand behind a throne none of them could sit on. The throne was empty of power and never vacant. And an anchor that cannot be seized cannot be destroyed either, which is why a fighter from Quara could walk into Gondar in 1855 and pick up a seven-hundred-year-old claim that was lying exactly where the last strong emperor had left it.

That is the lesson this case adds to the series, and it is a modest one but it holds. The thing that makes an anchor work is not that it is holy. Ethiopia's was a genealogy, China's was an impersonal Heaven and a dead man's closed books, Venice's was a lottery of ludicrous complexity. What they have in common is not the supernatural. It is that in each case the men competing for power could see, clearly and permanently, that the source of rightful title was one thing among all things in the world that none of them would ever be able to reach.

THE LINE NO SWORD COULD FORGE
SOURCES

A note on sources and scholarship

What this rests on, what is standard, and what is disputed.

The framework. The theory applied here — possession against ownership, the bystanders' coordination problem, the four properties of a working anchor, the sole-authorship condition, the two audiences, and the expenditure diagnostic — is developed in the companion papers of this series and is applied here rather than argued from scratch. Its borrowed components: Jeremy Bentham on property as a secured expectation rather than a natural fact; Morris Cohen on ownership as a slice of the community's coercive power delegated to an owner; Max Weber on the state as the monopoly of legitimate force and on the three grounds of legitimate authority; Barry Weingast (1997) on rights-policing as a coordination problem among subjects who must share a signal about when to act; Michael Chwe (*Rational Ritual*, 2001) on public ceremony as a machine for manufacturing common knowledge; Roy Rappaport on the unfalsifiability of foundational sacred postulates; and Peter Berger on the grounding of a fragile human order in a cosmic one.

The historical spine. The conversion of Aksum and the consecration of Frumentius by Athanasius of Alexandria around 350; the Zagwe dynasty and the charge of illegitimate descent; Yekuno Amlak's accession in 1270; the compilation of the *Kebra Nagast* in the early fourteenth century; the wars with Adal under Ahmad Gragn from 1529 and the Portuguese intervention; Fasilides' foundation of Gondar in 1636; the Zemene Mesafint from 1769 to 1855 and its termination by Kassa Hailu as Tewodros II; Menelik II, Adwa in 1896, and the southern conquests; Haile Selassie's constitutions of 1931 and 1955; the Wollo famine of 1973; and the revolution of 1974 — all follow the standard record. Harold Marcus's *A History of Ethiopia* and Bahru Zewde's *A History of Modern Ethiopia* are the accessible entry

points; Taddesse Tamrat's *Church and State in Ethiopia, 1270–1527* remains the standard treatment of the medieval period.

The Abuna. The appointment of the Ethiopian primate by the Coptic Patriarch of Alexandria from the fourth century until the twentieth, the embassies bearing gifts, the necessity of permission and payment to the Muslim government of Egypt, and the Sawiros episode under the Fatimid vizier Badr al-Jamali are all standard and well attested. The autocephaly sequence — the agreement of July 1948, the consecration of Abuna Basilios in January 1951, and his elevation to Patriarch by Pope Cyril VI in 1959 — is likewise standard. The juxtaposition of that date with 1974 is offered in this study as a fact worth recording and explicitly not as a causal claim.

Land tenure, and where it is contested. The gult/rist distinction follows Allan Hoben's *Land Tenure among the Amhara of Ethiopia* (1973), the standard anthropological treatment, supplemented by Richard Pankhurst's *State and Land in Ethiopian History*. The characterisation of gult as office-linked and in principle non-heritable is the mainstream position; the category of *riste-gult* and its abolition by parliament in the 1960s alongside *siso* is documented. **Donald Crummey's argument, from Gondarine land charters, that gult rights were in practice transferred by sale and inheritance without state involvement is a genuine and live scholarly dispute, and this study flags it in the text because the sole-authorship reading of the Ethiopian case depends on how it is resolved.** Crummey's *Land and Society in the Christian Kingdom of Ethiopia* is the place to start.

Contested elsewhere. The starting date of the Zemene Mesafint is given here as 1769, following the assassination of Iyoas I, but some historians date the decline of central authority substantially earlier, to around 1706. The traditional reading of the whole period as simple decline has been questioned by scholars who see more continuity and more functional regional governance than the "era of the princes" framing implies. And the extent to which the Solomonic claim was believed literally at any social level is not settled; Sara Marzagora's reading of learned Ethiopian understanding as religious rather than genealogical is cited here because it bears directly on this framework's distinction between conviction and common knowledge, but it is one position among several.

On what is not attempted. This study makes no claim to original historical research. It is an analytical synthesis that applies a structural framework to an established record, and its contribution, if it has one, lies in the questions put to the material rather than in the material itself. Where the framework and the record disagree, the record wins, and the section above on where the case breaks is the part of this study its author considers most worth keeping.